

Research Update is published by the Butler Center for Research to share significant scientific findings from the field of addiction treatment research.

RESEARCH UPDATE

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Consequences of College Binge Drinking

Colleges and universities are taking a closer look at alcohol consumption by students, and for good reason: binge drinking rates remain high and the consequences of binge drinking harm students and interfere with learning. University officials and scientists are working together to develop and test interventions to reduce binge drinking among students.

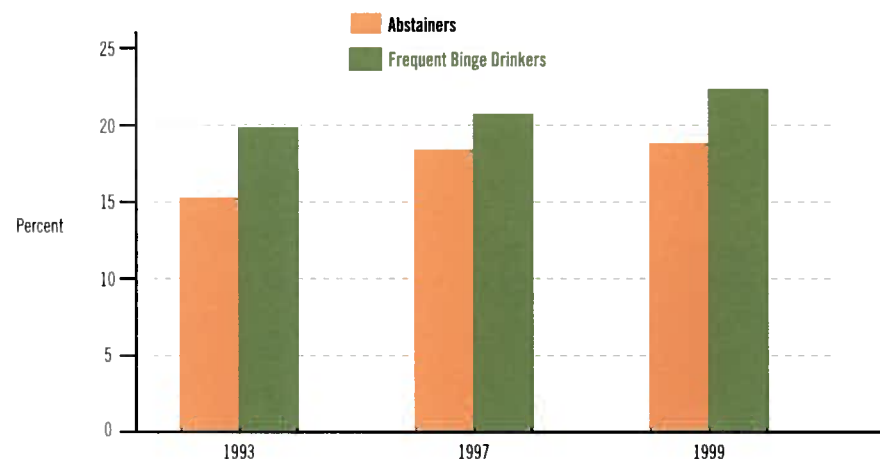
College Alcohol Studies at the Harvard School of Public Health

How common is binge drinking among college students? The Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (CAS), a nationally representative survey of over 14,000 students at 119 college campuses conducted in 1993, 1997, and 1999,¹ found that more than 40% of students self-report binge drinking in the two weeks prior to questionnaire completion. Researchers who study alcohol use define binge drinking as four or more standard drinks in a row (such as 4-oz. of wine or 12 oz. of beer) for women and five or more standard drinks in a row for men.

Further, frequent binge drinking (binge drinking three or more times in the past two weeks) was reported by 20%, 21%, and 23% of students in 1993, 1997, and 1999 respectively. Interestingly, this series of studies found that while binge drinking rates have increased slightly, so did rates of alcohol abstinence. In 1993, 1997, and 1999 the percentage of students reporting abstinence from alcohol was 15, 19, and 19.2 respectively (see figure). Contrary to popular belief, almost one in five college students reported abstaining from alcohol and this number appears to be increasing.

Wechsler and colleagues¹ further analyzed the 1999 frequent binge drinking and abstinence data by demographic categories. In terms of gender differences, more men (26%) than women (21%) reported frequent binge drinking. Among ethnic categories, whites (26%)

Abstention and Binge-drinking Rates Among College Students



SOURCE: Harvard School of Public Health College Alcohol Study (CAS).

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THE HAZELDEN EXPERIENCE

In 2000, over 700 high school and college-age young people received either residential alcohol and drug treatment in Minnesota or outpatient treatment at Hazelden Chicago. In Minnesota, Hazelden works collaboratively with a local college to ensure successful transition from treatment to on-campus structured recovery programs for students.

CONTROVERSIES & QUESTIONS

Question: Since most college students are under age, why are colleges promoting responsible drinking instead of abstinence?

Response: Because the majority of college students are not alcohol dependent, some college administrators believe that responsible drinking programs more effectively reach the majority of students. However, given the laws against drinking by those under 21, many believe abstinence is the appropriate goal for all under age college drinkers.

Question: What approaches are appropriate for students with drinking problems?

Response: Abstinence is an important and attainable goal for young people with alcohol dependence disorder. Appropriate screening for alcohol use disorders allows professionals to create individual treatment and intervention plans. Clearly, not all college binge drinkers are alcohol dependent. However, the consequences of their heavy use warrants reduction. For those drinkers, non-abstinence based alternative interventions are empirically supported.^{5,6}

HOW TO USE THIS INFORMATION

- **University Officials:** Investigate binge drinking problems on your campus and advocate for empirically based interventions.
- **Students:** When choosing a college, be sure to inquire about alcohol consumption on campus, consequences experienced by students as a result of alcohol use, and institutional efforts to combat binge drinking.
- **Health Care Providers:** Exposure to excessive consumption of alcohol warrants screening and intervention for alcohol problems among college age health care seekers.

Consequences of College Binge Drinking

reported frequent binge drinking more than Hispanics (17%), African Americans (6%), or Asian Americans (8%). Among students who were fraternity or sorority members, 65% and 80% of those who lived in greek houses reported binge drinking.

In another CAS survey,² researchers questioned college students at 140 schools about binge drinking and involvement in athletics. The results showed that 61% of those involved in athletics were binge drinkers.

The Consequences of Binge Drinking

Binge alcohol use causes specific and serious problems for students. The immediate pharmacological effects of alcohol consumption impair motor ability, alter judgment, and decrease self-control and inhibitions. Immediate or chronic alcohol abuse may lead to academic problems, relationship problems, legal troubles, and physical and mental health complications. In one survey of college students conducted at a major Midwestern university approximately nine in ten binge drinkers reported careless behavior due to drinking.³ This careless behavior included missing a class, regretting actions, blackouts, arguing with friends, getting into a bar fight, getting behind in class assignments, being hurt or injured, and damaging property. Almost two-thirds of the binge drinkers surveyed reported risky or reckless behavior such as unprotected sex, unplanned sexual activity, and being suspected of drunk driving. One-third of binge drinkers in this study also reported authority problems including troubles with campus or local police, being arrested, and getting into trouble with university officials.

Consequences from binge drinking are not limited to only the binge drinkers. Students who attend classes, share living spaces, and participate in the same social activities as binge drinkers also experience the consequences of binge drinking. Wechsler and colleagues¹ surveyed students who did not binge drink and lived in dormitories or sororities or fraternities at low- and high-binge drinking schools. Students at high binge schools were three times as likely to experience secondhand binge drinking effects than their counterparts at low-binge drinking schools. Specifically, they reported study or sleep interruptions (71%), care taking of an intoxicated student (58%), being insulted or humiliated (36%), having a serious argument (23%), experiencing an unwanted sexual advance (23%), and being assaulted (11%).¹

Strategies to Decrease Binge Drinking at Colleges

Recognizing that binge drinking on college campuses is a detriment to students' health and education, higher education officials are implementing programs to educate students and change drinking norms among students. CAS researchers surveyed 734 college administrators to learn what binge drinking intervention strategies are popular on college campuses. Almost all of these administrators reported some type of general alcohol education (97%) and alcohol supply restrictions (98%). A smaller but substantial number of administrators reported advertising restrictions (90%), alcohol-free dormitories (62%), and institutional programs to monitor and respond to student alcohol use.⁴

Unfortunately, the most popular strategies to reduce binge drinking have not been empirically validated. In fact, general education strategies have been repeatedly shown to make no difference in reducing binge drinking on college campuses.^{5,6} This may be because general

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education programs do not specifically target binge drinkers or the alcohol information presented is not new information and is too general.

Scientific study of interventions to reduce binge drinking have produced some encouraging results. In a review of the literature, Walters and Bennett⁶ found that interventions that focused on attitudes about alcohol use or skills-based behavior change were promising. Successful attitudinal programs focused on identifying and altering erroneous beliefs about alcohol, comparing values and actual alcohol consumption and related behaviors, and promoting accurate attitudes about alcohol use.⁶ Skills-based programs that resulted in reduced use exposed students to responsible decision-making, empowering students to control their behavior, and using non-alcohol based coping methods.⁶

Although the more popular education programs have not been effective, growing evidence suggests attitudinal and skills-based programs reduce binge drinking among college students.

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The Butler Center for Research informs and improves recovery services and produces research that benefits the field of addiction treatment. We are dedicated to conducting clinical research, collaborating with external researchers, and communicating scientific findings.

Patricia Owen, Ph.D., Director

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